

## Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 12

# Salcombe Women at War

Hannah Bradbury

### 1. Introduction

The role of the woman in the First and Second World Wars was utterly indispensable. During the 'Great War' of 1914-18, women were a necessity to the effort as unprecedented numbers of men were wounded or killed in battle, leaving the working home front drastically weakened. Twenty-one years later, with the outbreak of the Second World War, this need for female labour rose again.

Before the outbreak of war in 1914, women were confined to the restrictions of the domestic sphere, both within the home and through their typically female jobs; at this time, of approximately 24 million adult women in Britain, around 1.7 million worked in domestic service, 800,000 in textile manufacturing, 600,000 in clothing trades, 500,000 in commerce and 260,000 in local and national government, including teaching. But the war was set to change all of this, and as well as heart-break and destruction, it brought with it a possibility that women had never had before. By 1914, almost 5.09 million women, out of 23.8 million, in Britain were working, with thousands in munitions factories, while others joined the Land Army, knitted gloves, socks and balaclavas for the soldiers, or volunteered for the Red Cross.

When Britain found itself facing a second war with Germany, women were recalled into the workplace. They filled many of the same roles as before, but advancements in warfare meant that the soldiers fought in the air as well as upon land, bringing the reality of war to the home front. As a result, the number of different jobs available to women increased tenfold.

Women were considered 'heroines of the home front' in the defeat of Hitler, juggling the maintenance of the family home with their new, formal positions. Although a challenge for women, this return to the public working sphere significantly increased self-esteem, and a dramatic increase in industry jobs for women took the percentage from 19.75% in

1939, to 27% in 1945. In 1941, British history was made when conscription was extended to women for the first time. This saw 600,000 women recruited into the WRNS, WAAFS and ATS. However, Britain found itself facing a labour shortage in 1942, where 1.5 million were needed for the armed forces, with an additional 775,000 required in munitions and other services. This troubling time brought an increase in war propaganda, aimed at coercing people into joining the labour force. Women were its target audience.

Amongst many others, women could be found in the following sectors of the labour force between 1939-1945:

- Women's Auxiliary Fire Service
- Women's Auxiliary Police Corps
- Air Raid Precautions
- Salvation Army
- Women's Voluntary Service
- WREns
- WAAF
- ATS
- Women's Land Army
- Red Cross

With the brutal attacks of the Blitz on London, and the devastating Blitzkriegs across major parts of the country, it would be easy for one to assume that the majority of the labour force was found in large towns and cities. But when considering the landscape needed during wartime, it becomes clear that this was not the case.



*First World War Poster*



*Second World War Poster*

The countryside offered the war effort — both during the First and Second World Wars — grand mansions suitable for turning into hospitals, and with acres of arable land it was perfect also for the re-establishment of the Women's Land Army. By 1939, previously unused land was also turned into American air bases and munitions factories, and with many small southern towns build up around estuaries and beaches, the perfect conditions were provided for the rehearsals of the D-Day Landings that would take place in Normandy in 1944. Salcombe — a usually quiet and picturesque haven, hundreds of miles away from the overseas danger — was just such a place.

## 2. The Great War

Women's response to the outbreak of war in 1914 was mixed. Some took an anti-war position, while a larger minority threw themselves behind the patriotic cause. Most saw the war and the sacrifices they were expected to make as inevitable.

### Red Cross Hospitals and VADs.



Following the outbreak of war in 1914, the British Red Cross formed a joint war committee with the Order of St. John, with the view to bringing together both financial and human resources in order to provide the best aid to the wounded soldiers returning to Britain, acting under the emblem of the Red Cross. Those who volunteered their services were organised into Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs); an organisation that provided field nurses mainly in hospitals. By the summer of 1914, there were some 2,000 VADs in Britain.

The role of a VAD required patience, humility and courage, and in many cases a thick skin; VADs often clashed with the experienced nurses due to their lack of skill, but as the war progressed, so did their abilities. Gradually the nurses were accepted.

The British Royal Red Cross Society trained the Voluntary Aid Detachment in roles such as first aid, bed making, giving a patient a blanket bath, feeding a patient and keeping a ward clean. But their duties increased as the injured arrived in their masses, bringing with them the horrific wounds of war, the likes of which many of these women had never seen before.

## Sharpitor V.A.D. Hospital



*Sharpitor V.A.D. Hospital, now the National Trust property Overbecks*

Among the many included in the roll of auxiliary hospitals — 'by the Joint War Committee and the Joint War Finance Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John of Jerusalem in England on Voluntary Aid rendered to the Sick and Wounded at Home and Abroad and to British Prisoners of War, 1914-1919' — is Salcombe's own Sharpitor V.A. Hospital.

Built in 1913 by Mr and Mrs George Vereker, having previously demolished the original building, Sharpitor House was opened as a Volunteer Auxiliary Hospital and convalescent home to wounded soldiers on August 23rd 1915.

Like many other families, the Verekers' sons — George Gordon and Robert Humphrey Meldicott - joined the war effort in 1914 and were posted to the front line. Tragically, within the first two weeks, on August 25th, the Verekers' youngest son, Robert, was killed in action. Grief-stricken, but desperate to prevent their son from having died in vain, the couple immediately offered their home — rent free — to the Red Cross. Almost a year to the day since their loss, the hospital was opened.





*Robert Vereker*

Sharpitor was a hospital of 36 beds, finely suited for hospital purposes with a beautiful view of the sea. Funds were supplied by Mr A. McIlwraith to meet the expenses of acquiring and maintaining the hospital, who further provided a motor launch and other conveyance for daily use, and a house for the accommodation of the nurses on duty.

A chapter on Devonshire hospitals in *'The British Red Cross Society - the County Branches their organisation and work during the first months of the war...'* details that...

'136 patients of the Expeditionary Force have been treated, and discipline has been well maintained. The staff has been supplied by the local V.A. Detachment, Devon/98.

This hospital has been well and efficiently conducted. The services of Dr H. Wilcox, M.B., Medical Officer-in-Charge, Mrs Foster, Organising Superintendent, Mr R.B. Edwards, Dental Surgeon and Miss Warren, Assistant Commandant, merit acknowledgement.' (p.118)



*Sharpitor Nurses*

The hospital was run almost entirely by members of the Devon/98 Detachment, with over half being employed at Sharpitor, and the nurses worked tirelessly.

Official documentation regarding individual nurses from Sharpitor are difficult to come by, however one charming account remains: the account of Annie Yeoman, a newly

recruited nurse at the time. In 2009, National Trust Overbecks put together an exhibition charting and commemorating its history as a hospital and convalescent home, seen through the life of this young nurse. During her years at Sharpitor, Annie Yeoman kept two autograph books and encouraged the men who stayed there to write in it. The document is made up of poignant, personal messages, many expressing the soldiers' thanks to the staff. One tragic message is simply a desperate plea not to be sent back to the trenches.

Amazingly, of the 1,010 soldiers who passed through Sharpitor V.A. Hospital during the war, none died. Fifteen servicemen remained in the area, and went on to marry local girls, and even nurses.

### 3. The Second World War

Women of the Second World War: words that conjure images of Dame Vera Lynn, Gracie Fields and Amy Johnson; three remarkable women famous the world over for their contribution to the war effort. They will be remembered forever, they have left their stamp on history.

But what of the women of Salcombe? What of the women from this small fishing town who before had had the pleasure of a quiet, simplistic existence?

Just like their counterparts in the larger towns and cities, Salcombe women sprang into action. From rationing to farming, to nursing and bereavement; from teenage girls to retirement age, the women of Salcombe were never idle.

#### The Women's Land Army

The Women's Land Army - a tough, physical service that provided for the war effort as U-Boats prevented merchant ships from bringing in food from abroad — sought young, fit women with no dependents (usually unmarried), mature enough to leave home and be sent anywhere in the country.

Women were enrolled at a local Women's Land Army headquarters — Kingsbridge, in this instance - or by registering their name on the National Service Guide at the local post office. They were expected to be aged 17 or over.



If their application was successful, they were given the Women's Land Army brooch, and expected to pledge themselves for the duration of the war.

It was a difficult job with long, strenuous hours, carried out across the country by women from all classes, usually on farms or landed estates.

What follows is a charming insight into the lives of Land Girls from the Salcombe area. Many were eager to join; while some found that the job, physically, was not for them. Some even found love, and at last, most importantly, the recognition they long deserved.

On the 8th of September 1939, an article was published in the *Kingsbridge Gazette* expressing the urgent need for the Women's Land Army by the War Agricultural Executive Committee for Devon. At first, it was requested that women and young people joined the men in the fields in their spare time, be they local residents or visiting on holiday. Gradually, the need for regular women workers increased until the 'Land Girls' worked the land as they had during the previous war, on a more official level. They were expected to send their applications to the Ministry of Agriculture, and if successful would receive a postcard informing them of their number. When this was received, they were to get in touch immediately with Miss M. Ilbert; in charge of the organization for the Kingsbridge district.

One week later, the Women's Land Army scheme was outlined during a discussion by the Kingsbridge Young Farmers Club in the Kings Arms Hotel, Kingsbridge; the need for women in these roles was becoming greater day by day.



The Ministry stipulated that wages were to be 7d. per hour for a 48-hour week, with training rates being set at 15s for the duration of a month. Overtime was available at a slightly higher rate, and girls were expected to pay 15s a week for their keep.

Miss Ilbert informed those at the discussion that the options for women were the mobile Land Army — an organization that could send them anywhere in the country; the local workers, that could send them anywhere in Devon, or the local part-time in which they could do what they did in their homes. When asked, Miss Ilbert could not say how long it would take a farm to get a girl, particularly one with experience; it was dependent upon how many applied.

Luckily for farmers, many women did apply over the years. One of the first to sign up in her area — Marjorie Wallace — was sent to Salcombe's Horsecombe Farm in the early stages of the war. At the time, Ms. Wallace was a young woman in her late teens. She and the other girls at Horsecombe Farm worked hours unthinkable to the average working man or woman today, finding themselves up by 4am, milking cows and delivering milk, amongst many other farm duties, which kept them working well into the night. In spite of this, Ms. Wallace described her years in the Women's Land Army as 'wonderful', particularly when she met farm owner and future husband, Nick Wallace in 1941. The couple married later, and went on to have a son. In 2009, Ms Wallace was at last presented with her badge and framed certificate, signed by Gordon Brown.

Following in the footsteps of the likes of Marjorie Wallace, many girls applied to Miss Ilbert eagerly for a placement upon a farm. Doris Patey, from Higher Batson, Salcombe, wrote enthusiastically to Miss Ilbert in the summer of 1941, requesting particulars for the Land



Army. Due to unknown domestic affairs, Miss Patey wrote to Miss Ilbert again sometime later, requesting another interview after the first was stalled. It seems clear that women were desperately keen to 'do their bit', and would not rest until they had done so.



For some, however, the physicality of the role was immense. For a Miss Broomfield working at Highwood, Moulton Hill in Salcombe - being a Land Girl was simply too much:

"I am under the doctor," she writes, "and he tells me I must not stop here, he says the hills are not suiting me, and I have got very underweight. I have lost a stone and a half since October, and he warns me that I cannot keep on losing."

Miss Broomfield felt her workload too great, juggling her responsibilities on a farm, and working in a garden. She goes on to detail to Miss Ilbert how she is expected to...

"chop wood, saw logs, fill coal buckets, carry up dustbins, clean windows, cut the lawn, grow sweet peas...cut the hedges...no I think I would rather...not be worried like this."

Miss Broomfield described herself as a hard worker during her time in the Land Army, who had never taken any time off, but feeling at the end of her strength, the fear grew that she would become very ill if she was to continue working upon the farm.

However, in spite of the obvious hardships, many women enjoyed their time in the Women's Land Army, and the sense of achievement and hard work they gained. They were an invaluable produce source for Britain, and by 1944, the number of members of the Women's Land Army had risen from just 7,000 to 80,000.



*South Hams Land Army girls with civilians, workmen and a dog, probably at Bowringsleigh, near Kingsbridge*



*Potato planting (or picking) Land Army girls at Scobbiscombe Farm, Kingston*

## Women's Voluntary Service (W.V.S)



The W.V.S. — or Women's Voluntary Service for Civil Defence — was established in May, 1938. As a voluntary organisation the duties and responsibilities of members ranged across a vast spectrum, and their work proved invaluable.

The Salcombe Women's Voluntary Service's contribution to the war effort was ceaseless between 1939 and 1945, and saw the support of many influential people. Between 1941-42, the highly regarded Lady Susan Elizabeth Clementine Waring was actively involved in the group's organisation, working alongside the local names of Atkinson, Cox, Haxley and Morton to name but a few. Lady Waring had already proven herself a hard worker in the face of war, establishing the Lennell Auxiliary Hospital for Officers in

Berwickshire, where she had served as administrator during the First World War, before she relocated to Devon and assisted the women of Salcombe. She carried a CBE from King George V, and was awarded the Order of Queen Elisabeth of Belgium for her work during the two wars.

Under the supervision of an M. A. J. Jennings, Salcombe W.V.S. thrived during the war years. Just as they were across the rest of the



*Lady Clementine Waring*

country, the organisation was vital to the safe moving of evacuees from dangerous locations, to areas of safety. Salcombe alone saw over 1,000 evacuees come and go, and the local women of the service tackled the responsibility remarkably; January 1941 alone saw the arrival of 490 evacuated children, and 95 evacuated mothers and babies. By March of the same year, the total passing through Salcombe had reached 662, the figure consisting of unaccompanied and accompanied children, mothers, babies and other adults, and by May this had risen to 800.



*Evacuees from London*

Salcombe W.V.S. members also played a vital role in clothing distribution and the returning of soldiers. In December of 1940, a Clothing Depot was opened at Number 2, Island Terrace, before talks began in January of the following year to open an American clothing distribution depot. The success of this section of the W.V.S was huge and immensely important, and their work continued throughout the war as they provided for those in desperate need.

When troops returned home, the W.V.S. was there to greet them, and this was no less true in Salcombe than in any other area. Throughout the duration of the war, the Women's Voluntary Service opened their Service Canteen in the youth hostel of the once Volunteer Auxiliary Hospital, Sharpitor House. They served frequently for the isolated groups of service soldiers who were situated across the coast at South Sands, but it was open to all. Twenty-five ladies from the Women's Voluntary Service worked in the canteen — unpaid — with a committee and chairman being formed for the organisation too. The canteen served everything from sandwiches and buns, to egg and chips and baked macaroni, and was open from 18:00 — 22:30pm. By 1944, over 1000 meals were being served on a weekly basis.

But the duties of the Salcombe branch of the W.V.S. did not end there. They were heavily involved in many other activities, and formed strong relations with the rest of the community.

By January of 1941, a hostel for evacuees was established — it contained 20 beds, and was staffed by three paid women, and matron, Miss Baldwin of the W.V.S. The women also opened a fully staffed war nursery in the summer of the same year, and saw attendances peak at 30 children, though the numbers were never low.

The W.V.S. assisted the setting up, and staffing, of the Sick-Bay Hospital at St. Elmo, for minor infections, illnesses and various other small cases, which opened on March 28th 1941, with 45 beds, a fully qualified matron and paid staff.

They also set up the Housewife's Service, which had a regularly high attendance, involving local women in many campaigns and training days, including "Help Your Neighbours", "Wings For Victory", and basic First Aid and fire-fighting, and anti-gas training.

By 1942, they were heavily involved in canvassing the town for salvage in the form of rags and scrap metal, and set up a group of women who made camouflage nets to be sent to the front. By December, forty had been sent back to the factory for distribution, sized at 29ft x 29ft.

The Women's Voluntary Service was also desperately important to the town and surrounding areas as a network of support for grieving relatives. December 1942 saw the arrival in Salcombe of the relatives of 18 men who were killed in naval action. Members of the W.V.S. met them upon arrival, arranged for them to be billeted, attended the funeral, and then took them back to Kingsbridge to catch their return train home. And in 1944, their involvement with the evacuees was still going strong — vital for a small town with much to contend with. On July 18th, the W.V.S. made all necessary preparations to receive a further 100 evacuees — mothers and children were billeted and put into requisitioned houses that had been cleaned and put in order with ready-made beds by the W.V.S., before the women greeted them with a large cooked meal.

## The Local Contribution

Much of Salcombe's involvement in the war came in the form of organisations; volunteer nurse groups, the Land Army, the W.V.S., but the work of the local people was just as important. Women who were shop assistants found themselves responsible for the rationing of food; they weighed each item accordingly, and contended with the ration books that customers brought in, changing from pencil to pen when it was discovered that many were rubbing out the markings and using their ration cards again to increase their intake of food. Many who returned from positions with the A.T.S., the WAAFS and the WRENS found themselves jobs in Salcombe Hotel, staffing the cafe and providing food and drink to the soldiers and locals, while helping to lift their spirits. Young and old alike





were actively involved in providing aid, with girls as young as thirteen training in First Aid, while women of retirement age offered their services as Fire Guards and members of St. John's Ambulance.

It is evident that helping the war effort was not just an expectation, but a desire of women of all ages; they were not prepared to allow their beloved towns to struggle when they had the means to assist. Touchingly, two elderly Salcombe sisters — the Misses Goddens, both of whom were spinsters and retired teachers — opened a room in their private home as a school when other local schools were fit to burst with the added attendance of evacuees. The experience of children at this 'school' came in the form of one classroom, where they were taught around a large iron table. The table itself was a Morrison Shelter, and when the sirens were sounded, the children were ushered inside as the teachers sang the Flannigan and Alan classic, 'Run Rabbit Run'. The children were gathered upon a soft mattress, and a steel grill placed over the front. The teachers did not shelter themselves.

War was a time of struggle for all, and for far too many it was a time of grief and separation. Men were parted from their families for years, and many would never return to them again. They witnessed unimaginable horrors on the front line, and fought to defend the freedom of the country they loved. But it is evident that the women were just as involved, and certainly just as important in Britain's victory in both the First and Second World Wars. For a small town, the women of Salcombe contributed massively, from nursing the wounded to housing evacuees and maintaining the run of the land. Their sense of community shone through in their tireless work, and remains just as important to the people of Salcombe today.

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to the following for their contribution:

The Royal Voluntary Service for the sending of the W.V.S. Civil Defence Monthly Narrative Reports for Salcombe during the war years of WWII.

The Red Cross Archives Centre for their research and information on Sharpitor House as a V.A. Hospital during the First World War.

Holly Trubshawe and team at Cookworthy Museum for the copies of the Women's Land Army Letters and photographs, and the copies of newspaper articles from the war years of WWII.

Published jointly by:

*Salcombe Maritime Museum*

Old Council Hall, Market Street, Salcombe, Devon, TQ8 8DE

[www.salcombemuseum.org.uk](http://www.salcombemuseum.org.uk)

&

*Salcombe History Society*

[www.salcombehistorysociety.co.uk](http://www.salcombehistorysociety.co.uk)

Salcombe Maritime History Papers

List of Titles

### *Salcombe History Illustrated*

- [Salcombe: Schooner Port ~ The Fruit Schooners & Deep Sea Traders](#)
- [Salcombe and the Great War](#)
- [The U-Boat War off the South Hams Coast 1915-18](#)
- [The Salcombe Lifeboat Disaster 1916](#)
- [Death of 'The Duchess' - The Loss of the \*Herzogin Cecilie\* in 1936](#)
- [Salcombe in the Second World War](#)
- [Salcombe Lifeboats ~150 Years of Saving Lives at Sea](#)

### *Salcombe Maritime History papers*

- [Medieval Trade and Warfare](#)
- [Tudor and Stuart Trade and Shipping](#)
- [The Spanish Armada 1588](#)
- [Pirates and Privateers](#)
- [Salcombe and the Civil War](#)
- [The Newfoundland Cod Trade](#)
- [The Threat from France 1778-1783 and 1793-1815](#)
- [Salcombe and the Smuggling Trade](#)
- [The Trade of the Estuary in the early 19th century](#)